

ETS 142

UNIT I ESSAY ASSIGNMENT: SUBJECTIVITY

THE ASSIGNMENT: As the culminating essay for this unit, write a six to eight page paper incorporating the assertions literary theory makes about subjectivity in your analysis of a text. **The final copy is due April 16, 2012.**

SOME ASSUMPTIONS AND HOW TO APPLY THEM:

- ❖ In our introduction to semiotics, we learned that people interpret their world through the (culturally specific) paradigms that associate (and exclude) signs, through the narratives and myths that link those paradigms together, and through the ideologies and codes set the interpretive parameters for all of these. Codes are often felt as binaries for all things our culture deems appropriate / inappropriate, favorable / unfavorable, etc. It is important to remember that these codes are reinforced through the texts people (often uncritically) read.
- ❖ These concepts coincide with Althusser's assertions about our subjectivity. Recall that in *The Theory Toolbox*, Nealon and Giroux state, "The 'subject' is an outwardly generated concept, an *effect*, an understanding of personhood based on the social laws or codes to which we are made to answer.... [It] is always understood in reference to preexisting social conditions and categories" (37).
→Your essay, then, may explore these questions:
 - How does a text position its characters? How they are represented? What does it tell us about them as people? Does this portrayal challenge or reinforce frequently told stories about them?
 - What does the text tell us about the process of / result of interpellation as it applies to the kinds of people portrayed in the text? Is it positive? Negative? Resisted? Unquestioned?
 - Why is this depiction of interpellation significant? What does it tell us about the kinds of people portrayed in the text? About our society?
- ❖ Implicit in this examination is the importance of the power relations that are at the core of our subjectivity. Nealon and Giroux also state, "Our agency is both *constrained* and *enabled* by the contexts in which we find ourselves" (195).
→So, in addition to the first set of questions, your essay also may explore these questions:
 - How much agency do the characters demonstrate?
 - Do they demonstrate an awareness of themselves as subjects?
 - Do they make any attempt to reposition themselves as subjects?
 - Why is this portrayal of agency is significant? What beliefs does it propose or reinforce about agency? Why does this struggle, or lack of a struggle, matter for how we understand the kinds of people portrayed in the text? For how we understand our culture?

SOME GENERAL QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AS YOU BEGIN WORKING WITH THE TEXT:

- What are the societal/cultural norms portrayed in the text?
- Subject positions are constructed with regards to race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical appearance, cultural practices, etc. How do these characteristics determine the characters' subject positions?
- How does a character's understanding of his/her subjectivity influence his/her agency?
- How does a character, in turn, affect or manipulate his/her culture?
- How are power binaries established, shifted, and played out in different contexts?
- How can semiotics concepts be incorporated into the analysis of this text? What are the important signifiers? What paradigms is the text constructing / engaging? What myths are being reinforced or challenged?

IDEAS YOU SHOULD CONSIDER IN ORDER TO ADD DEPTH TO YOUR ANALYSIS:

British sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall, stressing the role the reader plays in determining a text's meaning, has proposed three kinds of readings:

- *Dominant (or, 'hegemonic') reading*: the reader shares or is uncritical of the text's interpretive framework and, so, has the *preferred reading* of the text (i.e., the interpretation offered by the text's producer);
- *Negotiated reading*: the reader partly shares the text's interpretive framework and largely accepts the preferred reading, but also disagrees at some points and, therefore, sometimes resists and modifies it in a way which reflects his/her own experiences;
- *Oppositional ('counter-hegemonic') reading*: the reader, whose social situation places him/her in a directly oppositional relation to the dominant code (interpretive framework), rejects the preferred reading, bringing to bear an alternative frame of reference.

Consider how these ideas may complicate your reading of the text you've chosen:

- Is there anything interesting / revealing / strange / problematic about the dominant reading, the reading you imagine the author(s) would like the readers to adopt?
- Is there room for a negotiated or oppositional reading, one that would lead us to more critically examine the portrayal of the characters, their subjectivity, or the cultural climate in which the text was produced?

AS ALWAYS...

Be sure to use appropriate MLA documentation:

- For quotations from the text you are analyzing;
- When making direct reference to the concepts of critical theory;
- When using research to contextualize the object of your analysis in order to develop the significance of your claim.

We will have limited editing time in class. It would probably be useful to edit outside of class as well.

SUGGESTED TEXTS:

- Select a film and investigate these issues. Possibilities include: *The Mill on the Floss*; *Pride and Prejudice*; *The Scarlet Letter*; *The Letter*; *Thelma and Louise*; *Save the Last Dance*; *Love and Basketball*; *Bring It On*; *Billy Elliot*; *Black Hawk Down*; *MASH*; *Monster's Ball*; *Shallow Hal*; *8 Mile*; *Rabbit Proof Fence*; *Coming to America*; *Smoke Signals*; *Pretty Woman*; *Ma Vie en Rose*; *My Beautiful Laundrette*; *Bringing Down the House*; *Animal House*; *Malibu's Most Wanted*; *Bend It Like Beckham*; *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; *Nine to Five*; *Real Women Have Curves*; *The Man Who Would Be King*; *Harlan County, USA*; *Lost in Translation*; *The Station Agent*; *Chop Shop*; *The Wrestler*; *The Squid and the Whale*; *Brokeback Mountain*; *Crash*; *Anvil – The Story of Anvil*.
- Revisit a novel, play or a short story you have already analyzed using a New Critical model and bring the above assumptions to bear on the text.